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Tim Hajda

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The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America

by Donald and Lillian Stokes

Reviewed by Tim Hajda, Broken Bow

Don and Lillian Stokes are well known for their nature guides that cover a variety of subjects, from hummingbirds and beginner shorebird identification to reptiles and amphibians. Their original pair of *Stokes Field Guide to Birds: Eastern Region* and *Western Region* have remained popular among North American birders since their appearance in 1995. They were illustrated with photographs instead of the traditional paintings used in most field guides. The authors' latest book, *The Stokes Guide to Birds of North America* is essentially an entirely new and much-improved version of these two guides. Instead of being split into two books, this new guide covers all of North America in one volume.

Size Considering the scope and the fact that all 815 pages are glossy and photo-filled, it's understandably quite large and heavy. It isn't the type of guide that you'd want to lug around with you owing to this factor.

Layout Birds are organized taxonomically and are in a column format. Most of the 854 species included are given a full page or two to themselves, though many are given half-pages; however, none feel particularly under-illustrated. The pages are thoughtfully organized, with all photos placed at the top of the page in a visually-pleasing "block" and the text in one section at the bottom of the page. The very small range maps are placed at the bottom of the page for easy reference.

Illustrations The highlight of this guide is the sheer abundance of good quality photos. More than 3,400 are included, which far surpasses any other available photo guide. Most are comfortably large and the overall quality of the photos is superb. In my opinion, this factor alone places it far ahead of all other available photo guides. It's a visual feast if you like looking at bird photos, though it's debatable whether or not the photos are superior to a good illustration-based field guide.

Text The text is thorough, with descriptions of shape, most plumages, flight, habitat, subspecies, and hybrids. The common name, scientific name, body length, and ABA Code are also included. Unfortunately I find the writing style dry and boring. It's heavy on the adjectives and abbreviations. But as I mentioned before, a list of subspecies and hybrids that occur or have occurred in North America is included, which is something valuable that you rarely see in a field guide.

Photos or Paintings? It's often debated whether photographs or illustrations make a better field guide. I prefer an illustration-based guide over a photo guide, but I'm not against photo guides and I definitely don't like all painting-based guides. Birds are infinitely variable, and I feel that a painting by a highly-skilled artist can better convey what a bird looks like "on average" than a photograph can. In the end, it's whatever works best for you, and don't limit yourself to just one field guide. Better yet, get out into the field where you can learn the birds the best way: with hours of observation and note-taking.

Conclusion All in all I think that *The Stokes Guide to Birds of North America* is a beautiful, well-organized photo guide that is superior to its photo guide competitors. I don't think that it has outdone the best illustration-based guides, but it would make a nice addition to a birder's library as a desk reference.